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ABSTRACT

The computer and the World Wide Web must be recognized for the new and different slant that they can offer to the assignments in writing classes, including as a method of embodiment for M. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. While students encounter articles and approaches to controversial issues, many will not attempt to understand or embrace the various opinions present on issues. This may be caused by the topic/stance format of traditional essays and research papers. To shift the focus away from the individualism and stunted knowledge making of such essays, the professor sought to engage students in the conversations surrounding their topics and to show students how they were responders and participants in a larger conversation. Creation of an annotated bibliography Web page allowed students to find sources for their research papers. Students' critiques of the sources forced them to judge the Web sites and printed sources and to compare and contrast them. The form of the assignment was interactive, and students were able to visually see the topic conversations develop as Web sites were created and explored. (EF)

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# Dialogism in Freshman Writing Classes: Web Projects as Dialogic Knowledge-Making.

by Mike Pennell

CS 217 439

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

"Dialogism in Freshman Writing Classes: Web Projects as Dialogic Knowledge-Making"

Regardless of your individual institutional contexts--whether you teach your composition classes in computer labs on a daily basis, in MOOs, or in traditional classrooms with little computer availability—you are most likely aware of the impact computers and in turn the World Wide Web have had or are having on composition pedagogies. While not as ubiquitous as computers, Mikhail Bakhtin and his theories, have also received a fair amount of attention by composition scholars in both their scholarship and pedagogy. In the following time I have, I'd like to discuss the ways in which Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is embodied in my pedagogy, more specifically, a web project I use in my research and argumentative writing class—English 102, and thus affects the knowledge production of that class.

In her recent book, *A Pedagogy of Possibility*, which sparked my thinking on this topic and provides one of the most recent attempts by a composition scholar to engage the writings of Bakhtin, Kay Halasek, summarizes that for Bakhtin, "meaning, knowledge, and reality are constructed through language and between ideologically bound individuals within historically situated language spheres" (4). There are two key terms that lie at the center of this socially constructed understanding of reality, dialogism and heteroglossia, both of which represent the "processes by which people come to know through language" (8). As my time is limited, I will simply quote Halasek's differentiation of the two terms: "Heteroglossia is the natural chaotic state of languages as they exist in the world; dialogism is the organized manner in which these various languages interact" (9). One must understand that in Bakhtin's view, we all speak a different language and that "language is alive only in the dialogical intercourse of those who make use of it" (*Problems* 151). In addition, Michael Holquist, in his discussion of Bakhtin, adds that dialogism is an "epistemological mode…[in which] everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction among meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (426). Bakhtin himself contrasts dialogism with the state of monologism, which "denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness…another *I* with equal rights. … Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word" (*Problems* 292-293). Halasek defines dialogue quite succinctly as a "constructive activity…a cooperative sharing of texts…that leads to a new and heightened understanding of the issue at hand" (4). Bakhtin himself notes that "understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other" (*Dialogic* 282).

Each semester in which I teach the second section in my university's two-part writing requirement, English 102, which focuses on research and argumentative writing, I struggle with many students' monologic approach to the many issues which we discuss and write about. While students will read articles and approaches to certain issues, whether it be euthanasia, affirmative action, or censorship, that are presented to them in class that differ with their personal stances/beliefs, many will not embrace, converse, and

attempt to understand the various opinions present on issues. I stress my belief to them that to become a strong argumentative writer, one must engage in the ongoing conversation surrounding each issue they encounter to gain a more complete understanding of the issue on which to base their stance. For the most part, I receive lip service in return as the students gloss a variety of approaches or works but pinpoint those sources that agree with them. There is an aversion towards conversations in disagreement or at least not embracing their stance on an issue. While, if asked, students will include counter-arguments, these counter-arguments have simply been cut and paste into the text, not into the student's argument or dialogue; thus, in my opinion, knowledge is not being produced or constructed but rather stunted.

But as I personally question students' aversion towards conversing or engaging in a dialogue with a variety of sources, I shift my attention back towards the genre or form in which many students are asked to show their argumentative conversation—the research paper or other print-based assignments. Years before even entering a college writing classroom, students have dealt with the essay or "paper" as the form for showing their proficiency in writing classes and their knowledge of a subject. Despite the increase in the number of students who use computers regularly to compose their essays, these essays remain, for the most part, unchanged in form. By the time students enroll in their first college-level writing class, the writing of papers, and more specifically, the research paper, are nothing new to them and they expect them as part of the class (many times reacting shocked if a "standard" research paper is not required). Many seem pre-conditioned and ready to pick a topic, take a stance on that topic or issue and find sources to help support their opinion. Moreover, while they may acknowledge their need for sources to help support their stances, many simply assume that most readers will accept the thesis they are defending. However, students and many teachers seem to present these writings as students' original thoughts and inventions; thus, the students present the papers and they are graded as if they were an individual act. The goal of writing instruction in most cases, remains, as Berlin notes in *Rhetoric and Reality* to cultivate "an authentic identity and voice" (153) through a traditional form—a "paper."

However, I questioned how I could shift the focus away from individualism and the stunted knowledge-making that many students produce in print essays. My goal was not to explicitly enact Bakhtin's dialogism in the classroom, but rather to simply find a means to engage students in the conversations surrounding their topics and away from their monologic approach to writing about topics. I didn't want much I thought, simply Halasek's "new and heightened understanding of the issue[s] at hand" for my students. I hoped to show them that, in Halasek's words, "The utterance—a student essay, for example—is not a unique articulation of one individual's opinion on an issue, for that individual's opinion is shaped by previous contributions to the topic" (97). My students needed to see how they were responders and participants in a larger conversation—to engage in dialogical contact--and like Halasek, I feel this can be accomplished and students' writing can be improved "if they understand their essays not as organic wholes emanating from themselves as unique and unadulterated voices, but as utterances emanating from the complex network of relationships in which they find themselves in the university" and life in general, I might add (98).

My chance to physically show students the conversations surrounding each of their topics and at the same time allow them to actively engage in the dialogic atmosphere arrived when I recently taught my argumentative writing classes solely in computer classrooms. This change of setting has allowed me in turn to vary the assignments that students complete in the class as each student during each class sits alongside a fairly up-to-date computer. More specifically, my use of a web project, specifically, an annotated bibliography web page, has allowed students to more completely witness and engage in the myriad conversations which surround the varied issues that they choose to explore and in turn to make knowledge through the assignment. The annotated bibliography web page is a key component in the class which allows students to find valuable and not-so-valuable sources on the issues they want to write about for their final research papers (No, I haven't escaped that assignment yet). Once students have chosen a topic, usually they spring from our class readings, each student spends time searching the World Wide Web in an exploration of their topic. I ask them to collect and closely explore a variety of web sites that address the topic—these range from commercial to educational sites. At the same time, I require them to also collect print sources, not as many as the web sources, that address their topics. Once the sources have been collected, we spend a good amount of class time devoted to creating the web pages. On these annotated bibliographies, I require that there is a title to the page, an introductory paragraph, that orients viewers to the site, and some form of presentation of their sources—each of which include a link to the site and an annotation by the student that summarizes the site and discusses its validity, design, and usefulness for a person writing a paper or forming an argument on this topic/issue.

This assignment allows a variety of intertextual/dialogic interactions for the students. During the research and annotating of the sources, students must begin to understand the conversation that surrounds an issue. Furthermore, their critique of the sources forces the students to judge the site and compare/contrast it with others that they are encountering. Each student realizes that they will be possibly using his/her annotated bibliography on the next assignment (research paper) or someone else's, so there is an incentive included in the act. Similarly, the form of the assignment, a web page, is in itself interactive as the class and other web surfers can at any time engage in the conversation that is presented by the student pages. Visually, students can see the conversations surrounding a topic develop as various web sites are explored in the context of the web author's comments and page design. Moreover, I can project the students' pages on a large screen in front of the class and together we can explore the pages and see the multitude of sources collected. Finally, the use of both print and on-line sources requires students to acknowledge the interaction of print and "virtual" sources. Useful sources that may not be immediately accessible on-line are not left out of the student conversations surrounding their topics.

The computer and the World Wide Web and their continuing presence in composition studies and pedagogy, along with their importance to a growing number of our students, must be recognized for the new and different slant that they can offer to the assignments that are offered in writing classes. While not all may be willing to explicitly or implicitly

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acknowledge Bakhtin and his theories in their pedagogies, his understanding of dialogism becomes an interesting embodiment in web-based projects. Nonetheless, students must become interlocutors in the plethora of conversations surrounding the varying issues that they will encounter and write about in the composition class, not simply passive viewers to create knowledge through their research, not stunt its growth. The assignment discussed offers one way in which I have attempted to allow students a turn in the conversation of argument and in Irene Ward's words "a subject position in the conversation of humankind" (203).

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